

**BOOK REVIEW: *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* by Donald Schon (1983) Basic Books**

Schon does an effective job of exposing the “epistemology of practice” underlying and informing the ‘modern’ professional. This epistemology of practice – which he names “Technical Rationality” – is shown to be the heritage of Positivism, a program of hyper-rational scientific materialism that grew out of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment. As a consequence of operating from and adhering to this epistemology, the professions are narrowly concerned with “rigorously technical problem solving based on specialized scientific knowledge” (p. 21), and “professional knowledge [is] the application of scientific theory and technique to the instrumental problems of practice” (p. 39). Within this restrictive, objectified, reductionistic, materialistic agenda, research is separate from and considered superior to mere practice (or *praxis*) and artistry, of course, is the domain of irrational intuition.

As a dialectic to Technical Rationality, Schon draws from an impressive career as a consultant, developing an epistemology of practice he calls “Reflection-in Action.” “It is this entire process of reflection-in-action which is central to the “art” by which practitioners...deal with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict” (p. 50) – which describes most situations, doesn’t it? “When someone reflects-in-action [she] becomes a *researcher in the practice context*. [She] is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the new case” (ibid, italics added). Thus, the reflective practitioner is a professional who is fluid and adaptable, knowledgeable and well-researched, able to draw on a rich repertoire of “exemplars” in order to bring a creative solution to a unique and particular problem; she does in fact frame each problem anew.

The main body of the book is filled with case histories in which professionals from a variety of fields are illustrated applying principles of the “reflective practitioner” in action. One gets the feel that these are exceptional individuals, too brilliant in fact to fit into the narrow technical specifications of a position in an organization modeled after the epistemology of Technical Rationality. Schon states explicitly that the reflective practitioner is indeed a destabilizing influence in such rigid, entropic, conservative organizations. Such organizations are meant to function like well-oiled machines; the workers are meant to be like molded replaceable modules. That was the whole purpose of the Technological Program – the mechanization of society, the administration and control of society through efficient, regimented, technical decision-making. Reflection is inefficient; spontaneity is dangerous. Urban planners, for example, are trained to be technical rationalists – as a consequence they are responsible for producing machines!

Schon's development of the reflective practitioner is a refreshing divergence from the techno-mechanistic mindset, a re-humanization of the professions, and, we can believe, a viable model for the future. With the acceleration of the pace of daily life (exemplified in business), the integration of chaos and complexity theories into management (including the image of the "dynamically adaptive organization"), and the introduction of ever more refined communications and information technologies, success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may very well rely on integrating the sort of epistemology of "reflection-in-action" that Schon elaborates in his worthwhile book.

As an HOD student, I can see how Mr. Schon's ideas have influenced the development of the "scholar-practitioner" ideal.